

COUNTERING PRO-DEATH PENALTY ATTITUDES

BY

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UNDERGRADUATE THESIS

Submitted to the department of Psychology in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences as part of an
undergraduate research program

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2020

Urbana, Illinois

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Abstract

The death penalty has been an exigent issue in today's prison reform efforts. In this study, we tested two methods of changing people's minds about the death penalty to see which resulted in greater change of pro-death penalty attitudes. We tested the innocent-risk argument which asserts that there is a risk of killing an innocent person through the use of the death penalty. We also tested the deterrence-risk argument which asserts that the death penalty is not an effective deterrent. Through a randomized between-subjects design with a control condition, we found that the innocent-risk condition was more likely to decrease pro-death penalty attitudes.

Keywords: death penalty, attitudes, change, innocent-risk, deterrence-correction, argument, prison

Acknowledgments

Over my past years in college and these past three semesters working on my honors thesis, I would like to thank Brett Boeh for being an outstanding mentor and pushing me to succeed. I would like to thank Nathan Todd for hosting me in his lab, and for being a great professor that I could come to when I needed assistance. I would like to thank Eva Pomerantz for the amazing honors program course that she created which I can honestly say is responsible for helping me become a better writer and reader over any course I took. Thank you for showing me what it's like to conduct research. I would also like to thank Lynda Lin for meeting with me outside of class to help improve my work and reviewing my countless drafts. Thank you to all the brothers at Omega Delta Fraternity for making college memorable and eventful, and one last thanks to Amy Schulz who has always supported me since the start.

Countering Pro-Death Penalty Attitudes

For centuries, the death penalty has been a form of punishment imposed upon others as a form of justice, retribution, or revenge. By definition, the death penalty, or capital punishment, is the sentence of execution for murder and some other capital crimes (serious crimes, especially murder, which are punishable by death) (“US Legal Inc.,” 2016). Since the first reported incident in 1608, 1,493 people have died as a result of the death penalty in the United States, and currently more than 2,700 prisoners are on death row in the United States (“History of the Death Penalty,” n.d.). The United States is one of 54 countries around the world that still implements the death penalty and is the only Western country to still do so (“The Death Penalty in 2017”, 2018).

The death penalty has been critiqued and opposed for a long time, with the first recorded criticism in United States history being from an Italian jurist in 1764, when he published his famous “Essay on Crimes and Punishments” that called for the abolition of capital punishment (Kronenwetter, 2001). This was one of the first times a major study was used to help fuel social change, and academic studies have since been used for social change (Kronenwetter, 2001). Today, both supporters and opponents of the death penalty continue to introduce legislature that attempts to enforce or eradicate the death penalty. Policy and law are continually being influenced by research that attempts to find the most persuasive ways to shape or counter one’s beliefs. With more and more states slowly overturning the death penalty, new research serves as a steppingstone to help legislature and policy makers create new laws or lobby for them to overturn the death penalty (Law & MacDermid, 2014). Understanding what interventions might alter people’s attitudes towards the death penalty is important because it can help to shift policy and lead to reform.

In the current study, we aim to understand such interventions. In particular, we study two interventions. In the first intervention, we hope to understand if giving people information about the risk of killing innocent people might decrease pro-death penalty attitudes. In the second intervention, we hope to educate participants by helping them understand that the death penalty does not deter future crime. Highlighting the fact that the death penalty is not a deterrent might counter participants' commonly held and unfounded belief that the death penalty reduces the rate of crime. In addition to understanding if these interventions are more likely to decrease pro-death penalty attitudes individually, we are also interested in comparing them to discover if one works better than the other. Therefore, our research attempts to answer the following question: is giving information about risk or educating about deterrence more effective at countering pro-death penalty attitudes?

There is an extensive literature within psychology that attempts to better understand the attitudes people hold and how they can shift. One theory that has helped to understand how attitudes shift is belief polarization. Belief polarization (also known as the backfire effect) is defined as when someone strengthens their beliefs after observing the same data, thus polarizing their beliefs even more (Kuhn, 1996). To illustrate, Kuhn (1996) found that when participants were confronted with evidence contradicting their viewpoint, the participants then became more extreme with their opinion rather than moderating their opinion. This effect carries over to other studies as well, as Lord, Ross, and Lepper (1979) found that belief polarization prevented statistical reasoning (statistics) from shifting strongly held attitudes. The authors conducted a study where participants read note cards that displayed death penalty deterrence information through the form of statistics that was incongruent with their beliefs (those who were pro-death penalty read anti-deterrence cards, while anti-death penalty participants read pro-deterrence

cards). Once the participants were presented with the statistical information, they rejected the information presented and endorsed their opinion even more. They found that when they tried to undermine a commonly held belief about the death penalty through contradicting statistical evidence (information that is incongruent with their beliefs), this led to belief polarization among participants, rather than a change of endorsement. The participants who were strongly opposed to, or strongly in favor of, the death penalty attended to information that was in line with their beliefs and ignored any information that was inconsistent with their beliefs. Therefore, this avenue of research suggests that when a belief is strongly held, presenting contradictory statistical information may reinforce that belief rather than alter it (Lord et al., 1979).

However, other research suggests that presenting opposing statistical information may be an effective strategy for changing attitudes. One explanation why presenting statistical information might be useful is the process of cognitive dissonance, which posits that when a behavior is incongruent with one's attitude about a target, the unpleasant tension that occurs causes someone to change their attitude to make it congruent with their behavior (Festinger, 1962). Miske, Schweitzer, and Horne (2019) described how cognitive dissonance provided a rationale for their results. When participants who originally held the belief that the death penalty is a deterrent for future crimes were presented with statistics that showed that the death penalty is not a deterrent, the participants then decreased support for the death penalty. Their original attitude (the death penalty is a deterrent), followed by their change of behavior (agreeing with the statistics), led them to a new attitude that the death penalty is not a deterrent for future crime. This avenue of research suggests that it is possible to undermine commonly held beliefs through statistics (Miske et al., 2019).

Given the current research, there are contradictory findings regarding the use of statistical evidence to alter attitudes. Horne, Powell, Hummel, and Holyoak (2015) approached the research from both studies differently by delivering the information in a visual (i.e., moral dilemma) fashion, in contrast to the approach by Lord and colleagues (1979) (reading statistical information off a card) and Miske et al. (2019) (reading statistical arguments). To summarize, Horne et al. (2015) created a study to test the most effective way to counter anti-vaccination attitudes in those who held anti-vaccination beliefs. One of their conditions (i.e., vaccine risk condition) allowed for the delivery of information to be presented through visual aids that corrected misconceptions about anti-vaccine attitudes. In this condition, participants read a paragraph written from a mother's point of view about her child contracting measles, looked at pictures of children with measles and mumps, and read three short warnings about how important it is for parents to vaccinate their children. This illustrative, moral, and coherence-based approach allowed this condition to be more effective than the autism-correction condition where participants read statistical information constructed from the Center for Disease Control data attempting to undermine the unfounded claim that vaccines cause autism. In conclusion, when the participants were presented with a moral dilemma showing the risk of not vaccinating one's child, it elicited a response that was inconsistent with their general moral principle (vaccines cause autism). This could have created tension due to the internal conflict about the situation (i.e., cognitive dissonance) and the general moral principle. This tension induced a belief change among participants, thus causing them to view vaccines more positively (Horne et al., 2015). The autism-correction condition, a statistics-based approach, elicited a belief polarization effect, which aligns with the findings from Lord et al. (1979), where participants endorsed their commonly held belief even more after reading statistical information incongruent

with their belief. The coherence-based intervention within the vaccine risk condition illustrated how delivering information through visual-moral dilemmas can prove to decrease pro-death penalty attitudes more than statistical arguments.

The findings by Horne et al. (2015) contribute to our understanding about the most efficient ways to change people's attitudes, but there is still more research to be done in regards to comparing ways to change people's attitudes about the death penalty, such as testing a new argument that has not been tested before. The new argument that will be tested in this study is how raising the risk of killing an innocent person changes pro-death penalty beliefs. Our study plans to contribute to the research on how to counter pro death penalty attitudes by taking what are two common modes of argumentation used against the death penalty (innocent-risk argument and the deterrence-correction argument), and pitting them against each other to see which one changes the participant's attitude towards the death penalty the most. The deterrence argument has extensive research completed on it while the risk of killing an innocent person is not yet backed by science (Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002; Finckenauer, 1988). Because of the success in changing anti-vaccination attitudes through moral dilemma arguments in the study by Horne et al. (2015), we think that raising the risk of killing an innocent person will elicit greater change than the statistical approach employed by Miske et al. (2019).

Based on the study by Horne and colleagues (2015), our conditions will closely align with their conditions. The authors had success with their vaccine risk condition because they delivered their information visually through moral dilemmas, so our innocent-risk condition delivered the information in a moral-dilemma argument closely imitating the coherence-based vaccine-risk condition in Horne et al. (2015). Due to the belief revision that occurred in their moral dilemma example, we foresee our participants experiencing belief revision as well,

ultimately countering their pro-death penalty attitudes, the same way the participants in Horne et al. (2015) countered their anti-vaccination attitudes. Horne and colleagues (2015) found unsatisfactory results with their belief-correction condition, so we anticipated that our deterrence-correction condition (undermining the commonly held belief that the death penalty is a deterrent for future crimes) using statistics would not be as effective as our innocent-risk condition in changing pro-death penalty attitudes. It is also important to add that our deterrence-correction condition will deliver statistics in the form of a moral dilemma video, adopting the success from moral dilemma arguments from Horne et al. (2015). Using a moral dilemma approach for the deterrence-correction condition may help statistical information influence participants, but as stated in Lord et al. (1979), statistical information may not be the best route for changing attitudes. On the contrary, results from Miske et al. (2019) do support that it is potentially possible to counter pro-death penalty attitudes under the correction condition, but this finding is inconsistent because it is incongruent with Lord et al. (1979). It is important to see how a visual coherence-based presentation may help the effectiveness of statistical arguments.

What intervention will elicit greater change when countering pro-death penalty attitudes? Using the deterrence-correction argument and the innocent-risk argument, we tested to see which of the two methods is the most effective at changing pro-death penalty attitudes. We hypothesize that countering pro-death penalty attitudes will be more effective when we point out the inherent risk of potentially killing an innocent person than when we try to undermine a commonly held belief that the death penalty is a deterrent. Being that the death penalty is a controversial and political topic, it will be hard to alter people's endorsement of the death penalty (Kaplan, Gimbel, & Harris, 2016). Albeit difficult, the results from the study have the potential to help a layperson counter pro-death penalty attitudes, and our research can help a policy maker or

legislature enact a new law, help suspend the death penalty in a state, and contribute to the future of policy and law in the death penalty's future in America. To answer our research question, we used a pretest-posttest design and a between-subjects study design with two experimental conditions and one control condition. We measured the death penalty attitudinal change score from the three conditions to determine whether the deterrence-correction condition or the innocent death-risk condition was more effective at changing people's attitudes towards the death penalty.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from the psychology subject pool at a large Midwestern public university. To participate in our study, participants had to be 18 years of age or older. Participants were screened by answering an item about their political beliefs. The political item read, "How would you identify your political beliefs?" The responses ranged from one (*very liberal*) to seven (*very conservative*). Those who rated their political beliefs as a four (neutral) and above were eligible to participate. In order to be included in the study, participants needed to complete both the pretest and posttest attitude questionnaire and indicate that they completed the intervention as well. Overall, a total of 95 participants chose to participate in the survey, but 5% did not finish the survey or did not complete the survey correctly. Thus, 90 participants were included in the analyses. The final sample had 29 participants in the control condition, 31 in the innocent death-risk condition, and 30 in the deterrence correction-condition. The mean age of the participants was 19.64 ($SD = 1.54$). Most of the sample was female (71.1% female, 28.9 % male), and although predominantly White (47.8%), the sample was racially diverse (3.3% African American or Black, 28.9% Asian, 12.2% Latinx, 1.1% Native America, 1.1% Pacific

Islander, 1.1% something else, and 4.4% preferred not to answer). Participants identified as predominantly Catholic (41.1% Catholic, 10% Atheist, 8.9% Agnostic, 8.9% Christian, and 31.1% fit into other categories). All participants who completed the study were compensated with course credit.

Materials and Design

There were three video conditions used in this study: an innocent death-risk video, a deterrence-correction video, and a control video. In the innocent death-risk condition, participants watched a three-minute and 34-second video about the risk of killing innocent people on death row. The video followed Ray Krone, a man who was on death row for ten years. Of many things, he spoke about how he was innocent, the risk behind having the death penalty, and how “We can’t have a penalty that’s not reversible” (Alanticphil, 2012). In the deterrence effect-correction condition, participants watched a four-minute and 49-second video about how the death penalty is more likely to deter future murders if there is a higher probability of the punishment occurring rather than the severity of the punishment (Ocbazghi, 2018). This video argues against the commonly held belief that the “death penalty deters future murders because of the harsh penalty that ensues after the crime.” This video illustrates that the strength from the deterrence effect does not come from the severity of the punishment (harsh penalty), but from the probability of the punishment being enacted. In the control condition, the participants watched a three-minute and 20-second video about the great horned owl, a topic that was not meant to influence participants’ beliefs on the death penalty (Nat Geo WILD, 2019).

Measures

Our demographic questionnaire consisted of 12 questions, including age, gender, race, religion, politics, geographical location, and family history. Most of the questions on the demographic questionnaire were adopted from the demographic questionnaire by Todd, Boeh, Houston-Kolnik, and Suffrin (2017). We were also interested to see how one's family history with the justice system interacted with their beliefs on the death penalty. Thus, two items about family history were included to ask participants to report whether the participant knew anyone close to them who was incarcerated in the past ("Have you ever had a close family member or friend incarcerated?") and whether they knew anyone else who was currently incarcerated ("Do you have a close family member or friend that is currently incarcerated?").

The Death Penalty Attitude Questionnaire (O'Neil, Patry, & Penrod, 2004) was used to measure general support for the death penalty as well as confidence in the death penalty being used as a deterrence for future crimes. The Death Penalty Attitude Questionnaire originally consisted of 19 items, but for the purposes of this study, we removed some of the questions and added three of our own. In the end, our questionnaire consisted of 10 items. This new scale was used for scoring the participants' endorsement of the death penalty before and after watching the videos. Our questionnaire was split into three parts: general endorsement, the death penalty as a deterrent, and the risk of the death penalty. Four questions were used to measure the general endorsement of the death penalty (e.g., "I think the death penalty is necessary") and three questions were used to measure their beliefs on whether the death penalty is a deterrent (e.g., "The death penalty does not deter other murderers"). The final three questions measured people's attitudes on the risk of the death penalty. The three items read, "The death penalty kills innocent people," "The death penalty wrongly accuses innocent people," and "There is a risk in using the

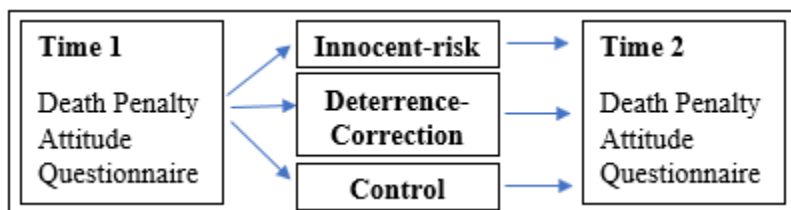
death penalty because it can kill an innocent person.” The items within these three subscales were rated on a Likert-like scale ranging from one (*strongly disagree*) to nine (*strongly agree*).

Procedure

Participants completed the study through an online course credit site. Participants first read the definition of the death penalty. Then, they were asked to complete the 10-item questionnaire about their beliefs on the death penalty. Afterwards, participants were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions (i.e., innocent-risk, deterrence-correction, or control) and watched the corresponding video, which was embedded in the survey. To prevent participants from moving on before they watched the video in its entirety, a page timer was set so the participant could only move on after the video was over. In addition, we included an attention check that asked participants if they watched the video. After watching the video, the participants were asked to complete the same 10-item questionnaire about their beliefs on the death penalty for a second time. A visualization of our study procedure can be seen in Figure 1. Upon completion, the participants completed the demographics questionnaire. After the study was concluded, a debriefing statement was displayed and credit was rewarded to the participants.

Figure 1

Illustration of our Study Procedure



Results

We first ran paired samples *t*-tests across all three conditions (innocent-risk, deterrence-correction, and control condition) to see if there was a significant difference between the pre-test attitudinal scores and the post-test attitudinal scores (within-condition). We found a significant decrease from Time 1 ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.22$) to Time 2 ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.09$) for the innocent risk condition ($p < .05$). Additionally, we found a significant decrease from Time 1 ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.11$) to Time 2 ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 1.07$) for the deterrence-correction condition ($p < .05$). We also found a significant decrease from Time 1 ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.83$) to Time 2 ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.79$) for the control condition ($p < .05$). To test the hypothesis that the innocent-risk condition yielded greater attitude change than the deterrence-correction and control condition, we then ran a one-way ANCOVA on the post-test scores across the three conditions controlling for pretest scores. Results revealed there were significant differences in death penalty attitude scores between conditions [$F(2,86) = 5.86$, $p = .004$]. Estimated marginal means showed that the innocent-risk condition yielded the lowest overall endorsement score ($M = 3.37$) compared to the deterrence-correction ($M = 3.51$) and control ($M = 3.74$) conditions.

In order to find out which conditions were different, we ran post hoc pairwise comparison tests. The difference between deterrence-correction and the control condition was not significant ($p > .05$), suggesting we cannot tell the deterrence-correction and the control conditions apart. The difference between deterrence-correction and the innocent-risk condition was also not significant ($p > .05$), also suggesting we cannot tell the deterrence-correction and the innocent-risk conditions apart. The only significant difference was between the control and innocent-risk condition ($p < .05$), which suggests that we can tell these two conditions apart. The participants in the innocent-risk condition had a lower post-test mean score than the control condition's post-test mean score. This finding is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Display of our Paired Samples t -test Data

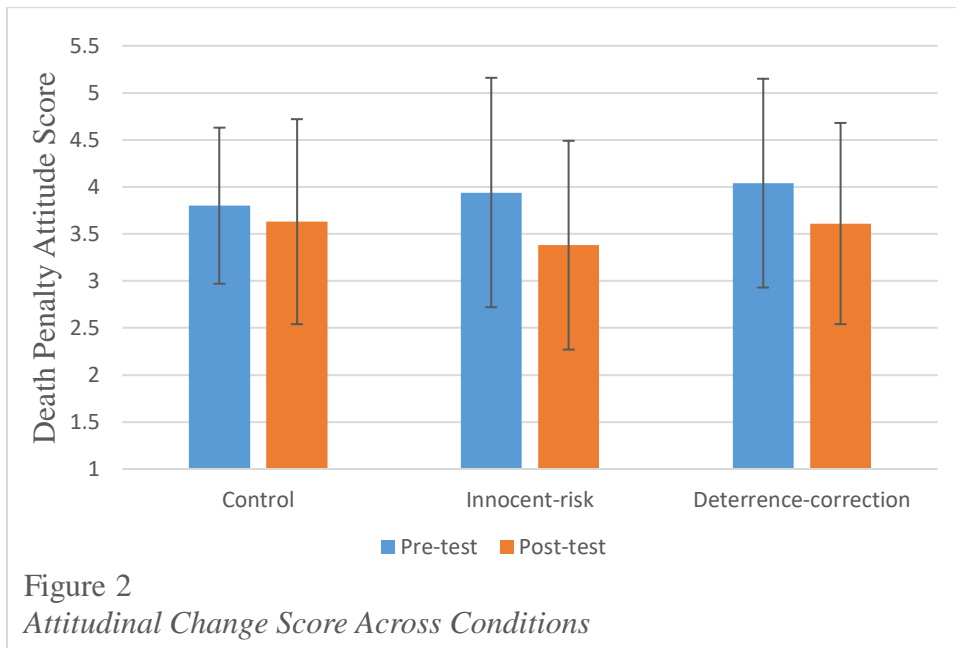


Figure 2
Attitudinal Change Score Across Conditions

Discussion

In this study, we tested two common arguments against the death penalty (innocent-risk and deterrence-correction) to see which was more effective at changing pro-death penalty attitudes. Upon review of the results, paired samples t -test showed that the results were significant for the innocent-risk, deterrence-correction, and control condition. In reference to the control condition, participants' endorsement of the death penalty after viewing the control video decreased as opposed to staying the same when they took the death penalty attitude questionnaire before the condition. As a result of its variance, it should be noted that the control condition was not constant throughout the study (low validity) and was not successful, and further references when comparing interventions to the control should be done so with caution.

We failed to prove that the innocent-risk condition changed pro-death penalty attitudes more than the deterrence-correction condition. It appeared that when comparing the innocent-risk condition group to the control condition group, there was a significant difference in change in death penalty attitudes between the two groups. This is analogous as if one member was randomly selected from the innocent-risk condition group and was mixed with the control condition group, the member could be told apart from the control condition. When comparing the deterrence-correction condition group to the control condition group, there was not a significant difference in change in death penalty attitudes between the two groups. This is analogous as if one member was randomly selected from the deterrence-correction condition group and was mixed with the control condition group, this participant could not be told apart from the control condition. This suggests that the deterrence-correction condition was not effective at changing pro-death penalty attitudes. Although the innocent-risk condition could be told apart from the control condition and the deterrence-correction condition could not, this does not mean that we can conclude that the innocent-risk condition was more effective than the deterrence-correction condition.

What could have caused our innocent-risk condition to be successful compared to the control condition was the assumption that pointing out a moral dilemma would be effective at changing people's death penalty attitudes (Horne et al., 2015). The moral dilemma behind the innocent-risk condition is that the death penalty could possibly kill an innocent person. Sometimes, a person is in the wrong place at the wrong time, and that person ends up on death row facing the death penalty. When participants are shown the risk of the possibility of this event occurring to someone, they may think twice about how they endorse the death penalty. While there is a significant difference between the innocent-risk condition group and the control

condition's death penalty attitude score, this significance can be explained by the success seen by showing risk in the study by Horne et al. (2015). In their study, they found that expressing a moral dilemma by showing the risk of not vaccinating one's child was effective at changing anti-vaccination attitudes. Our innocent-risk condition closely mirrored the vaccine-risk condition in the study by Horne et al. (2015), which can be one possible reason for the success of our condition. This condition provides a foothold on the potential effectiveness of countering pro-death penalty attitudes by means of raising the risk of killing an innocent person with the death penalty. Future research should test this method more to see if they can replicate the findings.

It is apparent that although the deterrence-correction condition was presented in a moral dilemma fashion, similar to Horne et al. (2015), it was not as effective as the results found by Horne and his colleagues. Research by Miske et al. (2019) showed that displaying information in the form of statistics can be effective, yet in this case, the statistical information within the deterrence-correction condition was not strong enough to significantly alter pro-death penalty attitudes compared to the control condition. In terms of what the condition entailed, having a video display statistical information may have been lacking entertainment value (even through a moral dilemma approach), which could have affected its effectiveness (Lord et al., 1979). It is also important to note that Lord and colleagues (1979) found that when trying to undermine commonly held beliefs through statistics, a backfire effect can occur (when one's personal beliefs become strengthened due to mixed information), which may have hindered participants' responses to changing their pro-death penalty attitude beliefs. Although Horne et al. (2015) found success with their moral dilemma argument (anti-vaccine risk condition), they also found that when participants were presented with statistical information that was incongruent with their commonly held beliefs, they displayed belief polarization causing the participants to endorse

their original beliefs even more. This is parallel to the deterrence-correction condition because it also tried to undermine a strongly held belief that the death penalty is a deterrent through statistical information. Generally, it appeared that presenting information through statistics like the studies from Lord et al. (1979) and Horne et al. (2015) outweighed the optimistic results of using statistics from Miske et al. (2019).

Limitations and Future Research

There were a number of limitations in our study. One limitation that could have influenced our results was the number of participants. After cleaning the data, there was a total of 90 ($n = 90$) participants, with 30 ± 1 participants in each condition. Increasing the number of participants could have allowed more power to detect effects in the study. It could have allowed the data to level-out and influence the results. Another factor that could be responsible for the lack of significant data was the method in which the study was administered. Our study was administered online through a psychology subject pool which can lead to participants being distracted during the study and not solely paying attention to the study in front of them. It should be noted that 5% of our participants had to be excluded from analyses because they did not pay attention to the directions and the conditions, so it is not completely implausible that the method in which we collected this data impaired some students' ability to focus on the study. Another factor that could have influenced people's attitudes about the death penalty was the mere fact of just thinking about the death penalty itself. The initial death penalty attitude questionnaire could have been an intervention itself, causing the participants to alter their beliefs about the death penalty. Regardless of the video condition, the questions alone could have been responsible for changing people's attitudes. It could have been that just thinking about a topic and evaluating the topic within one's thoughts can cause someone to change their minds about the death penalty,

irrespective of the condition they were in. A potential way to test this hypothesis is to have a condition where participants just think about the death penalty, as opposed to viewing a video for their condition. This new condition could yield results that thinking about a topic could cause someone to come up with a new point of view about a topic, causing them to endorse the death penalty less.

What could have caused significant results within the paired samples *t*-test for the control condition was the video we used for the control. The control condition was an audio-visual about the great horned owl, an owl that primarily hunts on rodents in a hunter style fashion. At first glance, this video is just about an owl, but after participants answered the death penalty attitude questionnaire, they were primed with thoughts about death and ideas along that nature. These questions could have been an intervention within itself as well, causing the participant to change their death penalty attitudes even despite what condition was shown. For example, it could have been that participants compared the mouse (who was hunted in the video) to people on death row, with the owl being the executioner. Although this analogy is illustrative, it is not illogical to think that participants were influenced by the death of an innocent animal, and that influenced the way they thought about how beings die and by what means. Next time, researchers should choose more benign videos that have no ties to the study, such as a video about how to make a peanut butter sandwich, or a video on how to tie shoes.

It is also worth mentioning that the control condition in Time 1 (before watching the video) and Time 2 (after watching the video) yielded a considerably lower change in attitude of the death penalty compared to the innocent-risk and the deterrence-correction conditions. The differences in the attitude change scores between Time 1 and Time 2 for the control, innocent-risk, and deterrence-correction conditions were 0.17, 0.56, and 0.43, respectively. This could

have been due to the control condition having some mild performance and shows that the participants all thought more alike to one another in comparison to the more variant responses seen in the innocent-risk and deterrence-correction conditions. For future studies, a stronger and better baseline control condition should be used.

In this study, we were interested in testing whether it was better to talk about the risk of killing an innocent person than trying to undermine a commonly held belief when countering pro-death penalty attitudes. Although our findings were not fully in-line with our hypothesis, our study may form a foundation for future research to help applied work in policy and legislation. Future research should capitalize on our findings and improve on our limitations for future literature regarding the death penalty.

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